

The Hour of Spring Has Struck!

**by Rasha Al Ameer
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We are gathered here today while the Lebanese book exhibition has started a few hours ago, the universities all over the Arab world are swarming with students, boys and girls, the schools are living everyday on their pupils' dreams and ambitions; we are gathered here today, on behalf of those candidates – each one of them with no exception – to free citizenship, in order to reflect, out loud and with no censorship, on the developments of reading and writing and the book industry in a world concerned with numerous political, security, economic, development and technological issues, in an Arab world concerned with a spring that might be doomed to overflow into the following seasons.

So springtime is here. Will the clock hands come back to normal position? Or has all what we have missed – maybe duly or unduly – in terms of freedom, reading, attention, in the last fifty years, entailed a duty on every spring – deserving its name or not – to fight it and beat it? Before the emergence of all these changes we are witnessing, experts have been writing hard reports diagnosing our diseases, including weak reading, reflection and research in Arabic. Have these reports, as harsh as a whip, and full of advices and proposals, succeeded in pushing us to reverse our backward trend in reading, writing and reflecting? Or is it that countries which have been desperate politically, which have lost their respect of their language, their universities and their schools, which are plagued by numerous kinds of poverty and impoverishment – material and intellectual – as well as deprivation of freedoms, which are refused any drinkable water, electricity, sanitation and roads, which are both victims and authors of injustice, have not yet been convinced of the importance of reading and of the values and wealth that are beyond reading?

Time has exceeded us, dear friends; the second Guttenberg revolution has exceeded us, with its mighty computers and free-of-charge books. What should the second millennium Arabs do to erase the sentence written centuries ago on their brows by their poet: "Oh Nation, so ignorant that all other nations laugh at"?

Oh Nation that has Neglected Numbers and Denied Them!

According to reliable sources, ancient Arabs were knowledgeable about numerals and the zero number on which serious scientific theories were based was of Arab origin. So why nowadays' Arabs are so afraid of numbers? And why do they imitate the ostrich that buries its head in the desert burning sand when they are told, with numbers, that reading in their language is continuously deteriorating – in spite of a prosperous situation of schools, institutes, universities, publishing houses, newspapers and magazines?

Is it true that the Arab individual's reading time is only – and this is an unfair rate of course – 6 to 10 minutes per year?

Is it true that our book production is too limited as compared to our number?

Is it true that victory in our societies is that of oral communication, represented in the use of telephones and TV stations?

Is it true that there will never be revolutions unless nowadays' Arabs will reconcile with their language(s) that are thirsty for modernity and with their minds matching those of active men and women in the world?

All the above is true; those who examine our developments agree on saying that scientific reading – i.e. all that is related to medicine, engineering, chemistry and computers – is and will not exist in the near future in Arabic... What kind of reading are we talking about today, and citizens – if they are given full freedom – remain slaves to their own interests, and their interests do not necessarily push them to master Arabic, but rather to get closer as much as possible to a universal communication language with which the most complicated surgeries are made and the most luxurious towers are built.

Those who have Arabic as a language are wrong in thinking that the language of science, finance and entertainment will make them do without any reflection on the developments of their own language. They are wrong if they think that money – with which armies can be tamed (look at the first and second desert storm wars) – and the expertise of engineers building those cities blooming in the middle of the desert (look at the urban development in the UAE), can alone make a language miracle. Had money been able alone to develop dictionaries and recover stolen dignities, our rich people – and they are so many! - would have rushed to it, but it seems that what we want is too complicated to be attained with all the Croesus wealth held by our States. What is the mistake made? Where is the mistake and how did we let it become a sin? How could we reject that ruin that lies in our spirits and in our minds?

By the Ruins of Reading

By the ruins of reading and writing we are standing today, not to mourn and cry but to read to the Spring people some melodies and suggestions we have never stopped singing.

The reader is not a passive subject but a real active subject when there is reading and if those who were endowed with this language and with this geography, if they are not convinced of that, so their world will reach an end.

No Coercion in Reading

If reading is the secret of the mind and of the heart... how can the literate Arab live without reading? It seems that our Arab citizens willfully walk away from reading in Arabic the way Japanese people refuse to eat basic bread in preference for varieties of fine rice.

All Arabs refuse to read, whether on paper or electronically. They refuse this act of forging the mind and the heart. In spite of the attempts made by principled democracies to impose reading as a lifestyle, through compulsory schools and universities as a platform for those who reach them by merit to move from one social segment to another, it will always remain

fortunately an elite activity the importance of which is only recognized by those who believe that spirits will undoubtedly benefit from this hard exercise.

Reading is an elite activity and specialized reading that touches thorny issues is only practiced by its professionals, who are usually a marginal group of people who influence society if politics allow them to and do not use them to serve their own purposes. The one who is in dire need for reading as a means of living gets his books from outside the market; reading is for him an inestimable commodity. Its price, even if it is high sometimes, is nothing compared to the long hours spent by the reader who uses all his motors to access it.

With the first Guttenberg revolution, the West recognized the need to link between the book as a commodity and the market. When schools became compulsory in most of the industrialized countries – after an era during which children had been used to work in factories – the book industry people considered that, in the light of the development of printing houses becoming capable of producing hundreds of thousands of books, it has become necessary to link the book to schools, universities and institutions that are capable of consuming hundreds of books. So its industry was linked to those who are capable of consuming hundreds of thousands of it, i.e. schools, universities, churches, mosques and armies. Democracies that are convinced of the importance of knowledge and reading maneuver with their citizens once with the carrot and another time with the stick. They create in the consumers a need – sometimes virtual – for consuming books. How could we, who are living in countries that face a thousand problems, work on creating such a need in our citizens, if they exist? Would we tell our citizens that God addressed his believers the first time by saying to them: “Read”? Would we threaten them of apostasy if they do not read?

Would we tell them that reading helps break the enemies’ arms? And that it is the most lethal weapons of the mind and the heart?

How could we convince the Arab man and woman that reading, in all its kinds – and of course we do not mean by that literary or journalistic reading exclusively – is an urgent need just like their need for a telephone or a medicine?

Eureka!

Reading is not yet considered as a need in a “telephonized”, “televised” and computerized world; so we need to cultivate this need in us. Reading is a need, a need but it is like a bitter apple, bitter. It is time consuming and of a bad mood. Its stars do not glitter like movie, pop, football or politics stars. So why don’t we work on improving the image of the writer and the reader? Why don’t we give the reading in Arabic back its glitter? Why don’t we give the bitter apple a sweeter taste?

Eureka: this paper will not make a miracle and will not be able to finance a miracle pill called “reading Viagra”, it can be taken by the lazy reader and he gets excited and devours books one after the other! This paper is about words I am conveying hoping they will be heard.

So I suggest, before I go back to my position, as a citizen, reader and publisher, whose books lie in warehouses, the following pillars:

First pillar: Restore the importance of reading by restoring the writer's importance Arab star writers are few, they obtained their starhood either through international awards such as the Nobel prize granted to Najeeb Mahfuz and the Goncourt Prize to Ameen Maalouf, or through their continuous involvement in public affairs such as Ala' Al Assouani, author of "Amaret Yaakoubian". Is it possible to add to these three more stars? Is it possible for the writers to have tight relationship with schools and universities as it is the case for Mrs. Emily Nassrallah in Lebanon whose books are adopted for the secondary school curriculum? I want our writers to become heroes, heroes the literature and thoughts of which are a source of pride to us, is it possible to achieve this?

New prizes like the Booker prize tried to fashionize the novel and to make the novelists' life more prosperous, did it succeed? It did to a certain extent. However, this is not enough, knowing that the media coverage of this prize can only be translated into a real boom in the sales and not an improvement of the quality of what is written.

Many prizes try to motivate Arabs to writing, translation and research: Babteen in Kuwait, the Booker in the UAE, Kalamani UAE project, Sheikh Zayed prize, King Saud prize, Al Fikr foundation prize, in addition to small prizes that have not yet imposed themselves as well as what is offered by Arab and Western funds to writing workshops and to the writers directly. These funds that are spent annually and that amount to approximately hundreds of millions of dollars have not yet been able to motivate the Arabs to read, does this mean that the money spent through these and other initiatives is wasted?

Why don't the organizers of these huge prizes organize a conference to evaluate the efforts they have undertaken till now and to inform the Arab public, with all transparency, of what the Arab spend on what is written and what is read in countries that spend billions on military equipment?

Second pillar: Fashionize reading and transform it into a need linked to the market. Universities, institutes and reading clubs are prosperous in the Arab world, why don't we question them on what they read and don't read? Why don't we refer the language to an exciting subject?

Every year, Westerners add to their dictionaries new words that are voted for by the public, so why don't we adapt this idea from them so that we can use this opportunity to rearrange our own dated dictionaries?

Third and most important pillar: Restore the importance of our language and our dictionaries. Is it reasonable that a whole nation becomes void of any effective dictionary? Unfortunately Arabic, in all its dialects, remains inadvertently void of any dictionaries. So are there any real knights who could fight this dangerous state?

Springtime is here, the spring of freedom, hope and dialogue, which will restore the esteem to the mind and the heart. Without this esteem, this season will remain too young in my opinion and I would say: Tell me if writing and reading are of your interests and I tell you whether you are my friend.